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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 MANAMA 001347

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KISL](#) [BA](#)

SUBJECT: SHIA OPPOSITION SOCIETY AL WIFAQ MOVING TOWARD
REGISTRATION, ELECTION PARTICIPATION

REF: A. MANAMA 1091

[1](#)B. MANAMA 111

Classified by Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) The Political Societies Law passed in July requires all political societies to register with the Ministry of Justice by November 2. The question of registration has created controversy within the membership ranks of leading Shia opposition society Al Wifaq, though contacts say that the leadership, in particular President Ali Salman, supports registering. Board member Nizar Al Qari said that a series of town hall meetings leading up to general assembly meetings on September 22 and October 6 should pave the way for a decision to register. Hard-core oppositionists Vice President Hassan Mushaima and spokesman Abdul Jalil Singace resigned from the society September 17 to protest the move to register. Discussion of registration has led naturally to the question of participation in the October 2006 parliamentary elections, with leading Shias both inside and outside the organization speaking publicly on the need for Al Wifaq to participate to protect their community's interests. End Summary.

Al Wifaq on the Defensive

[1](#)2. (C) The July Political Societies Law has put leading Shia opposition society Al Wifaq on the defensive, forcing it to take the positive act of registering with the government just to maintain its status quo position. The law requires political societies to register with the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) by November 2 (Ref A). Societies that do not register with MOJ can continue to operate under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Social Affairs, per the 1989 Societies Law, but, as Minister of Social Affairs Fatima Al Belooshi publicly warned September 8, they would not be able to conduct political activities.

[1](#)3. (C) Passage of the new law led to a round of intense criticism of the government and the upper and lower houses of parliament, the (appointed) Shura Council and the (elected) Council of Representatives, by oppositionists. Senior Shia cleric Shaikh Issa Qassem condemned the law during a Friday sermon in late July, and Al Wifaq President Shaikh Ali Salman pledged to abide by Qassem's opinion, saying he was "a sword in Qassem's hands." Al Wifaq board member Nizar Al Qari told Pol/Econ chief that Qassem and Salman's opposition to the law, while genuine, did not mean that they ruled out registering with MOJ. Al Qari said there was enough ambiguity in their statements to support registration, particularly if such a move were couched in terms of continuing to fight the law, but from within the system.

Outreach to Membership to Support Registration

[1](#)4. (C) Al Qari said Al Wifaq is conducting a series of town hall meetings with its members to discuss the question of registration, leading up to two general assembly meetings, the first on September 22 and the second on October 6. Al Qari speaks in favor of registration at the public sessions, carrying out Salman's strategy of calming people down and getting them to come around to accepting the law. He said that informal surveys indicate some 80 percent of Al Wifaq members support registration following the town hall meetings. The pro-registration leadership intends to use the general assemblies to generate a mandate in favor of a decision to register. In September 18 press reports, credible sources say that the Al Wifaq board has decided to submit a formal recommendation in favor of registration to the September 22 general assembly. In his September 16 sermon, Qassem said that registering under the Political Societies Law represents a necessary legal step that will give Al Wifaq the freedom to challenge other laws it opposes.

15. (C) Al Wifaq is an umbrella organization that unites many political and (Shia) religious trends under the common cause of opposition to the government. The question of registration, however, is causing splits. Vice President Hassan Mushaima and spokesman Abdul Jalil Singace resigned from the society September 16 to protest the move to register. The board did not act upon their resignations and asked them to reconsider. Mushaima and Singace have spoken publicly about forming a council that would act as a pressure group on the government. (Note: As an unregistered entity, such a council would be vulnerable to a legal challenge by the government.) Al Qari told us earlier that he would welcome the departure of hard-line dissenters from Al Wifaq, calling them a "headache." Nizar Al Baharna, a founding member of Al Wifaq who left the organization in late 2004 and formed his own association, the moderate Justice and Development Society, said publicly that he might dissolve his group so he and the other members could rejoin Al Wifaq now that the "moderate trend in Al Wifaq is on the rise and the society is headed towards participation in parliamentary elections."

Alternatives to Registration All Bad

16. (C) Al Wifaq members who oppose registration under the new law face stark alternatives. Their choices are:

- a. Dissolving Al Wifaq so it does not exist in any form;
- b. Maintaining its status under the 1989 Societies Law and ceasing any political activities;
- c. Continue operating in defiance of the government in an illegal manner;
- d. Forming a new society (which would face the same question about registration); or
- e. Declaring the formation of a political party (which remains illegal in Bahrain).

Likely in response to this internal debate, Shaikh Issa Qassem said in his Friday sermon on September 9 that he objected to the idea of dissolving Al Wifaq, thus providing pro-registration members with cover for their advocacy efforts. Al Qari told us earlier that Qassem enjoys his position as spiritual advisor to Al Wifaq and would not allow the society to go underground.

From Registration to Participation

17. (C) The issue of registration has led naturally to a discussion of participation in the October 2006 parliamentary elections. Prominent Al Wifaq members Jalal and Jawad Fairouz, Murtadha Bader, Ibrahim Hussein, and Abbas Mahfoodh September 4 publicly announced their support for registration and participation in the parliamentary elections. Referring to Qassem's September 9 sermon, Bader said that when Qassem spoke of Al Wifaq heading toward a "new political stage," he meant participation in the elections. Al Wifaq participated in the 2002 municipal council elections and has already announced that it will do so again in May 2006. Ali Salman has said publicly that Al Wifaq will announce its candidates list for municipal council elections before the end of 2005.

18. (C) In previous discussions, Al Qari has strongly implied that Al Wifaq is leaning toward participation in the elections, but it seeks some gesture from the King as cover to demonstrate for its members that the boycott produced results. Shura Council member and president of the Gulf Academy for Democratic Development Mansour Al Arayedh and parliamentarian Mohammed Al Shaikh, both Shia, separately told Pol/Econ chief that they expect Al Wifaq to participate in the parliamentary elections with or without a government concession. Al Shaikh commented that Al Wifaq recognizes it is weaker because of its boycott, which resulted in the organization removing itself from the playing field. Al Arayedh spoke of a long-term struggle between Bahrain's Shia majority and Sunni power elite, saying the next logical stage for the fight is inside parliament.

Criticism of Boycott

19. (C) Influential Shias outside Al Wifaq continue to advocate participation in the elections. Mansour Al Jamri, editor-in-chief of the independent Arabic daily Al Wasat, and widely-read Al Wasat columnist Sayed Dhia Al Mousawi continue their campaign supporting full participation in the elections, which they launched with great fanfare in early January (Ref B). In his September 17 column, Al Jamri says that Al Wifaq should finalize its decision on registration and enter the political process. Al Mousawi, who attended the Ambassador's September 11 commemoration event and visited

the U.S. on an IV program during the summer, addressed the elections in his September 6 column. He asks those who oppose registration what they have achieved by boycotting parliament. He points out that they were unable to stop any of the laws that parliament passed, and stresses that critical national issues need to be debated inside parliament, not on the outside. He lists the names of Arab scholars and intellectuals who consider the boycott to be a mistake, and adds that there are many political groups in other Arab countries that had boycotted elections at one time but which had reconsidered their positions and now participate.

Comment

10. (C) The controversy within Al Wifaq on registering under the Political Societies Law is likely a preview of the type of battle that could erupt as the parliamentary elections grow closer, but with even higher stakes due to the more difficult question of participating in the elections. In some ways, the prospect of shedding some of the most hard-core oppositionists during this go-around could actually make a decision to participate in the elections easier for Al Wifaq. President Ali Salman is a savvy politician who keeps his cards close to his chest. His guiding of the process toward registration has been adept so far; it is in Bahrain's larger national interest that he be equally skilled in moving toward elections.

MONROE